

USDA Forest Service
April 2007



SUBJECT: “More Kids in the Woods” and “Turning Inside Out”

There is growing evidence that today’s children are gravitating away from outdoor experiences and towards a virtual indoor reality. This disconnect from nature has serious long-term implications:

For the health and well being of our nation’s children:

Over the last three decades, the childhood obesity rate has more than doubled for preschool children aged 2-5 and adolescents aged 12-19. At present, approximately nine million children over 6 years of age are considered obese. While “exercise” in the outdoors helps to keep children healthy, “play” in nature is especially important for developing capacities for creativity, problem solving and emotional and intellectual development.

For the future stewardship of parks, natural places and our public lands: Young people who grow up without a connection to nature may lack the knowledge, skills, abilities or inspiration to seek careers in natural resources and land management, an understanding of environmental processes and the role humans play impacting and sustaining them. Children who learn to enjoy the outdoors from their parents are more likely to become individuals who choose to take action to benefit the environment when they are adults.

MORE KIDS IN THE WOODS INITIATIVE

To respond these national trends, the Forest Service has launched a program called “More Kids in the Woods”. It aims to engage children through: 1) Outdoor recreation activities that increase personal fitness, self-esteem, and social skills; 2) Nature-based learning that improves academic performance and standardize test scores. 3) Events that help children develop a connection to their natural world.

This is a prime partnership opportunity. This Challenge Cost Share pilot will seek to connect a broad array of ongoing activities by Forest Service units, nonprofit organizations, and local governments oriented towards nature-based youth programs.

NATIONAL RECREATION FORUMS

During the Forest Service’s Centennial Congress, participants called on the agency to enhance its youth programs in order to build a strong future generation of natural resource stewards and leaders. Ten significant themes emerged from Centennial dialogue sessions, including recreation, education, and how to reach an increasingly diverse and urban America.

In response to this input, the National Forest Foundation (NFF) and American Recreation Coalition (ARC) sponsored 6 recreation forums across the country. The forum themes:

“Turning Inside out: New Doors to the Outdoors” focused specifically on the West’s changing demographics and the benefits young people gain from outdoor recreation. Recreation groups, tourism interests, sportsmen organizations, and many others came together to share ideas for getting youth more involved in the outdoors. The six forums were held in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, Portland, and Denver.

To announce the results of the forums and the recipients of the **More Kids on the Woods** Grants, The National Forest Foundation, American Recreation Coalition and ReserveAmerica will host a special event for Congressional representatives, non-profit community leaders, and federal executives in Washington DC on May 22, 2007 featuring Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, and the Chief of the Forest Service. In addition, the Congressional Fitness Caucus has accepted an offer to plan an event that will highlight the linkages between physical activity, health and the outdoors.

What Can You Do?

Get Informed

Children and Nature Network: website: www.cnaturenet.org. This website and movement is an outgrowth of Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* book.

Get Involved

- Forge new partners to develop new opportunities for family fun!
- Find out what’s going on nearby and package family fun outings.
- Get involved in community trail projects that link local trails to regional trails and trailheads on public lands. (see: www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/bp-broch.htm)
- Work with Travel Montana to develop Montana Kids! internet site into an active travel planning tool.(Check out www.northernwisconsin.com/kids.htm)
- Develop informational materials to have on hand in your business that highlight active things to do nearby and in local public parks and forests.
- Support a State Summit on Getting More Kids in the Woods or a Governor’s Summit on Children and the Outdoors in support of the President’s proclamation that June be Great Outdoors Month see: www.funoutdoors.com
- Seek out and package “Voluntourism” opportunities
- Develop youth oriented tourism products: ie GPS Tourism, Geocaching, etc.
- Develop kid friendly activities packaged with Scenic Byways Materials.
- Contact your local Forest Service office to find out what family activities or projects may be available for you to package or market to your customers.

Presentation by Margaret Gorski, Tourism and Interpretation Program Leader for the Northern Region of the Forest Service; contact: mgorski@fs.fed.us; 406-329-3587.